

"Movement Creates Museum: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the Creation of Weeksville Heritage Center in New York"

Jennifer A. Scott,

Vice Director/Director of Research, Weeksville Heritage Center, Brooklyn, New York

Abstract

Weeksville Heritage Center (WHC) is a historic site of national significance that preserves the legacy of a free African American community founded in 1838. Chartered in 1971, Weeksville Heritage Center currently consists of the historic Hunterfly Road Houses, three nineteenth century wood-frame structures that are each restored to different time periods—the 1860's, 1900's and 1930's. Through tours and programs at the museum, WHC interprets the forgotten history of Weeksville, a free black, intentional, land-owning community which established its own schools, churches, anti-slavery organizations, and operated as a safe space for African-Americans in the greater New York area throughout the 19th century. We use the historic site, the physical landscape and our programming to highlight the creativity, entrepreneurship, and self-sufficiency demonstrated by historic Weeksville's residents. The museum is a direct result of more than a generation of community activism and struggle begun in the late 1960s to defend a history that very few knew or cared about. I will discuss the forty year fight to preserve and sustain the historic houses, and to recover the history, a successful effort that began in 1968, a pivotal year of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Hunterfly Road Houses were rediscovered in 1968 by James P. Hurley, a college instructor at Pratt Institute, located in Brooklyn, New York. Hurley, along with a few other volunteer students from the local area gathered in a "Central Neighborhood College Study" course to work on a neighborhood survey project. After learning about the existence of Weeksville, Hurley and, pilot, Joseph Haynes, rented a small plane and flew over what would have been the historic Weeksville area; they noticed from the air, four, virtually intact, old, wood-frame farmhouses bounded by an angled road. The houses, as it turns out, were located along Hunterfly Road, an old Native American trail and colonial road that had at one point traversed the present-day area.

Not long after the Hunterfly Road houses were rediscovered, they, along with many other structures were threatened by a "beautification" and urban renewal demolition effort in the area, called "Model Cities." In response, members of the local community rallied to save them from destruction, led by activist, educator, artists, and former Weeksville President for thirty years, Joan Maynard. Schoolchildren from the nearby school, local youth groups, boy scout troops, community residents, educators, activists and everyday people who became activists were instrumental in these preservation efforts. Many of the people who fought to save the historic houses were also involved with Civil Rights efforts, locally and nationally.

To help save the houses and their history, community members, with the assistance of local universities, conducted an archaeological excavation and used

the recovered evidence to testify at the Landmarks Commission at City Hall in 1970. Children and adults, alike, from the nearby community provided formal testimony and pleas for the City to protect the houses from destruction. A year later, the Commission declared the houses New York City landmarks, and the newly formed, Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History acquired the houses in 1971. That same year, the children of P.S. 243, the local school across the street from the excavation site, began to raise money so the houses could be restored and turned into an historic site. The houses were, later, listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The “Weeksville Society,” as it was formerly known, became an anchor in central Brooklyn, a leader in preserving the early history of African Americans in Brooklyn and one of the first grass roots preservation organizations in the country.

The community struggle to save the houses and the original archaeological excavation helped us to learn more than we ever knew before about the forgotten history of Weeksville. Stories of Weeksville are stories of courageous communities over time, who self-consciously, fought for social change. The activism of Weeksville’s 19th century residents was renewed during Weeksville’s rediscovery in the 1960s and continues into the present moment in the form of a non-elite community museum. By conveying these stories at the museum, we challenge existing narratives of American history and perceptions of people of African descent. Currently, Weeksville engages audiences with meaningful programs that interpret and contextualize this history by connecting it to contemporary issues through our historic Hunterfly Road house tours; public lectures and performances; artist residency programs for high school students; environmental education for elementary school children; an on-site Farmers Market and many other programs.

In 2009, Weeksville began on-site construction of a new 19,000 square foot, thirty million dollar sustainable “Green” (certified LEED Gold) Education and Cultural Arts Center (opening in 2013). WHC’s new Center will be the second Green museum in New York City when it opens, and will include education classrooms, a media lab, a contemporary art gallery, a performing arts space, a retail space, cafe, an oral history studio, and a research center, which hosts conferences, lectures, public forums and other intellectual activities for various audiences. The grounds - almost a full New York city block- will be landscaped to reflect 19th century agricultural features. The new building will turn Weeksville’s historic site into a cultural campus by providing high-quality music, dance, and short-run stage productions, contemporary art exhibitions, and technology-rich education programs in support of our organizational mission: to document, preserve and interpret the history of free African American, African, and Caribbean communities in Weeksville, Brooklyn and beyond and to create and inspire innovative, contemporary uses of African American history through education, the arts, and civic engagement.